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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the teaching benefits of World Wide Web publishing by individual instructors. Community colleges are actively involved in the national push towards distance learning. Many faculty members at community colleges publish course materials on the Web as part of both distance and traditional courses. As a result, a new rhetorical situation has occurred with respect to course material. In traditional settings, course materials were designed to accompany verbal context. But Web-published materials must have explanatory information embedded, in order to ensure their usefulness to students. The public act of publishing on the Web requires the instructor to think more critically about pedagogy. Prior to distance learning, the primary inter-institutional exchange of ideas came at conferences. Web publishing has allowed for much greater exchange of ideas between instructors, and in much greater detail, than is generally offered at a conference. This exchange of ideas can be viewed as a professional cooperative work group similar to student learning groups in traditional classrooms. Another benefit of Web publishing for instructors is the ability to create a readily accessible professional portfolio or curriculum vitae. The paper concludes with the assertion that the trend of Web publishing will continue to grow among community college instructors and offer new contributions to the teaching profession. (RDG)

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PUBLISHING ON THE WEB: OPENING THE DOORS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

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Community colleges are leaping headlong into distance learning, with consequences and implications for teaching and learning that remain to be seen. However, one consequence of the leap--web publishing by increasing numbers of individual instructors--is creating a new trend with several positive implications for instructors, individually and collectively, and for the teaching enterprise in general. These implications are the stuff of our paper, and this Third Annual TCC Online Conference abundantly illustrates the central point we want to make: that web publishing can benefit all of us at the community colleges level engaged in online teaching and learning.

Many community college instructors have recently become involved in web publishing in response to the current nation-wide institutional push toward distance learning. These instructors join--or have been part of, all along--the small core of early adopters of web techology who have been web publishing for several years. In the process of thinking about the uses of web technology and then creating distance learning courses via the internet, many of us have made changes in our other, non-distance-learning courses as well. In fact, in many cases, hybrid courses are evolving that share elements of both

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traditional and distance learning courses: one foot IRL (In Real Life, i.e., the physical classroom, or "meatspace") and another in the virtual worlds of the web, the MOO, the internet. These hybrid courses have virtually opened the doors of community college classrooms wide, making public to our colleagues what and how we teach. We think this is good for all of us, teachers and students alike. But we've written elsewhere about the potential benefits of online learning materials for developmental studies students at the community college level; we'll concentrate here on the benefits of web publishing for teachers and teaching.

NEW RHETORICAL SITUATION

A significant benefit of web publishing course materials accrues to the teaching profession. Most instructors who begin to web publish quickly discover, as they begin to write or adapt documents for the web, that the rhetorical situation created by our hybridized courses--where all course documents such as syllabi, schedules and assignments, as well as some learning materials, are published on the web--differs markedly from the rhetorical situation of our earlier, "traditional" courses. We discovered, for example, that documents we put on the web reside there stripped of the verbal context ordinarily provided in the classroom.

We soon realized that we had to write web documents differently--and not just because hypertexts require us to think about them differently than linear texts--but because course documents on the web must carry their contexts and explanatory information carefully embedded within them, in order to ensure that students find them useful. A happy

consequence of writing these contextualized documents is that they become as useful to a secondary audience of other instructors as they are to the primary audience of students for whom they are originally written. When we open the doors of our classrooms, then, we radically alter the rhetorical situation of our teaching. Before web publishing, we considered what and how to teach for the sole sake of our audience of students; now, we share what and how we teach with a secondary audience of learners, our online colleagues, as they likewise share with us via the web. A likely result is that we broaden and deepen our thinking about what and how we teach, just as musicians who begin to perform publicly start to broaden and deepen their skills, becoming better at what and how they play. Publishing on the web is a public act that motivates us to think more critically about our pedagogy—a clear benefit of this new rhetorical situation.

CROSS-POLLINATION

Educators traditonally disseminate information at (traditional) conferences. But there are more effective ways of swapping ideas--namely, by using our websites to house and display our teaching materials. One of the most energizing benefits we have found in putting our course materials on the web is that we are able to share teaching ideas and methods with each other to an extent not possible before. The metaphor of cross-pollination refers to the process begun perhaps when a bee lights on one blossom and then the next, transferring pollen so that the plant is fertilized and bears fruit--the work of both bee and blossom made strong, resilient and marketable. We see web pages in a similar way; an instructor can take something from someone else's page, bring it back to

his own, give back to instructors who visit his site, get feedback from them, etc.--and in the end, have a unique product that is stronger than had he worked in isolation.

The difference between the conference arena and the website can be illustrated by explaining our own recent experience at a conference. A presenter shared with us in a traditional format some materials from a course he teaches. Useful? Yes, but in a limited way. He had one hour to share his ideas; he had been working on the project for three semesters; one hour was not enough time to cover it thoroughly. So it was beneficial that he could give us a rough overview of the project and the outcomes. But then he also gave the participants his URL, his web site address. By visiting this website, we were able to more fully examine his materials and their theoretical basis that he had been working on for three semesters. We were able to take the role of students--or the role of educators--and evaluate their effectiveness.

The metaphor can be extended to also suggest that the web provides a place for the democratization of disseminating information. The bee, in its search for the good blossoms, is in control of where it stops, for how long, and what it takes away. At a typical conference this is not true for the average participant. To start with, at a conference, there have already been judges who have assessed--using their own criteria--the validity and quality of the proposals submitted. The judges or referees evaluate some proposals to be more meaningful and useful and others as less so. We are not also privy to their criteria nor do the presenters chosen to present always live up to the promises made in their proposals. A common result is that we find some papers/presentations

moderately useful--if we get a handout that doesn't get lost on our desk--while others are not useful because the presenters were ill-prepared or the information was simply of no use to us. When instructors publish on the web, however, we can choose which sites to visit and how long we stay, and we judge them according to our own criteria--that is, whether or not they are useful to us in our own classes.

In reality, this idea of cross-pollination among professional educators is very similar to what we, as instructors, require when students work in groups. The merits of cooperative learning, while still debatable to some, are clearly something we as teachers must reckon with. Many of us ask students to work in groups because we believe, based on research, that they will get more by working with others, even if "the something more" isn't related directly to content. We believe that they will learn how to problem-solve or how to think critically. We believe that they will learn something from their partners--that, in short, they will cross-pollinate. Extensive research on the use of cooperative learning activities in the classroom by Johnson and Johnson (1987) suggests that by requiring that students work cooperatively with each other, retention will increase, students will achieve better performance, as well as develop interpersonal skills. Kohn (1987) argues that cooperative learning encourages creativity and critical thinking. There are many others who advocate it for similar reasons. Why is it, then, that we as educators are reluctant to move in this direction professionally?

If the research that has been done is valid in the classroom, then it seems likely it is also valid in our offices and places of work. Websites that house our classroom materials

allow for this sort of cooperation in a very non-threatening way, but with the same end benefits. We have found that, by cooperating and collaborating via visits to our colleagues' websites, our teaching is more creative and thoughtful.

WEB PUBLICATION/PORTFOLIO/PRESENCE

Another benefit of web publication is that, once an instructor has published a course online, she has begun to build a professional portfolio of the most portable kind. Wherever the World Wide Web can be accessed, her web-published work is viewable. Over the course of time, the work that she has produced and published creates a webfolio that chronicles her pedagogical and professional accomplishments over time. If the instructor publishes not only her course documents but her conference presentations, workshops and papers online as well--if in short she ceases to create texts when she can create hypertexts on the web just as easily--she amasses and archives a body of work that speaks for and of her in the public venue of the web.

The next step is to create an online curriculum vitae that organizes, categorizes and presents this body of work as a web document as well. Such a vitae is easily updatable by the addition of a link to the new page or course site. The clear benefit of a web vitae is that it allows the viewer to see a description of professional accomplishments and, with the click of the mouse, the accomplishment itself. The advantage to a job seeker--and interviewer--is obvious. In the process of creating a web vitae, the instructor constructs a professional persona online, a virtual presence that can speak eloquently, thoughtfully, on behalf of the real person.

We can be sure that the trend toward web publishing will continue to grow among community college instructors, engaging many of us in putting our courses online for distance ed and other kinds of learning. We must carefully examine how these courses help--or fail to help--the students who attend community colleges. Let's not forget to examine the ways that our involvement in web publishing affects us, our fellow teachers, and our profession.

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